TANK MYTHS

U.S. M4 Sherman

Soviet T-34/85

On TV lately, there's been lots of information on World War II tanks ... ...And unfortunately, a lot of it is wrong

by Charles M. Baily

Editor's Note: *Charles M. Baily's book on the development of U.S. tanks and tank destroyers in World War II* (Faint Praise: American Tanks and Tank Destroyers in World War II) *is considered by many experts to be a definitive study of this subject. (Unfortunately, the book is currently out of print and is difficult to find.)*

I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore. Continuing reiterations of myths about World War II tanks, particularly American tanks, on television and in print are driving me to distraction. Adding injury to insult, the facts to quash these myths are available on library shelves for anyone willing to do the most basic research. With so many myths and so little time, this article will only address two: the Christie myth and the Patton myth.

The most recent version of the Christie myth seen by this author was an episode entitled "Tanks," one of the History Channel's series *Weapons at War.* In this episode, George C. Scott's sonorous tones describe J. Walter Christie's tanks and their revolutionary torsion bar suspension. Later in the segment, the curator of an Army museum, with a Christie tank in the background, tells us that the Christie suspension was so good that the Soviets used it in their tanks through the T-62. Implicit in the presentation is the larger part of the Christie myth — that the U.S. Army could have had a tank as good as the Russian T-34 if it had only heeded the genius of J. Walter Christie.

The technical facts of this program are dead wrong and the implication is tenuous at best. The Christie suspension was *not* a torsion bar suspension. It was a system of large roadwheels attached to bell cranks and coil springs. While the T-34 did have a Christie suspension, its immediate successor, the T-44, and all Soviet medium tanks ever since, have used torsion bars. This information is in standard texts that have been on library shelves for years.[1]

Both the suspension system and Christie's quarrels with the Army were best described by George Hofmann on these pages in 1976.[2] To summarize Hofmann's excellent article, Christie simply would not work with users to fulfill the military requirements but, instead, wanted the Army to fund the tanks that he wanted to build.

To address the larger myth, that the Army could have had its own T-34 if it had only listened to Christie, requires a brief examination of the Russian tank. The myth fails on two counts: the features that made the T-34 an excellent tank owed little to Christie and, in any case, the T-34's superiority over the U.S. M4 Medium tank is not convincing.

After purchasing models of Christie tanks in 1930, the Russians embraced the notion of fast tanks with enthusiasm. Their version of the Christie, the BT-7, follows Christie's concepts quite closely, including narrow tracks and thin armor. Russian ideas are evident by the tank's main gun, a 45mm, which was heavy armament for its day. (Firepower was never a distinguishing feature of Christie's designs.) As the Russians developed the fast tank idea, their own genius contributed the features that made the T-34 such a shock to the Germans in 1941. They added a 76mm gun, 45mm armor angled at 60 degrees, broad tracks, and a dependable engine. The only Christie feature on the T-34 was the suspension system.

Further, if we are to credit Christie with an overarching contribution to tank design, we should also look at those "other" Christie tanks, the ones built by the British. Like the Russians, the British also purchased Christie tanks in 1936 and used them as the basis for their cruiser tanks, such as the Covenanter and Crusader. These tanks

	T-34/76	M4A1
Gun/Muzzle Velocity (fps)	76mm/2160	75mm/2050
Armor	20-70mm – turret 45mm at 60 degrees – hull	3 inches – turret 2 inches at 47 degrees – hull front
Top Speed	31 mph	24 mph
Track Width	19 inches	16 inches
Weight	28 tons	33 tons

are far more similar to Christie's ideas than the T-34, being poorly armed, thinly armored, and notoriously unreliable.

Finally, the U.S. M4 medium tank does not suffer by comparison to the T-34. The table above summarizes some salient characteristics of both tanks.

The T-34's broad tracks relative to its weight offer the only obvious advantage over the M4. However, the T-34's two-man turret was clearly inferior to the three-man turret on the M4, which also had an efficient turret traverse that was better than either Russian or German equipment. Because its armor was sloped at 60 degrees, the T-34 was actually better protected than the M4, although this marginally superior protection had little practical advantage: German 75 and 88mm guns could readily penetrate either tank.

Both Russia and the U.S. improved their tanks during the conflict. Later T-34s had a three-man turret with an 85-mm gun. Later M4s were fitted with wider 23-inch tracks and a 76mm gun. On paper, the T-34/85 was nominally superior to the M4 because of its larger gun, but, in the few confrontations during the Korean War, M4s easily killed the Russian tanks. In sum, the superiority of the T-34 over the M4 is not convincing.

The remarkable reputation of the T-34 is primarily based on the technological shock that it delivered to the Germans in 1941. Popular German military histories enhanced this repute. By the time the Germans encountered M4s in late 1942, they were already coping with the T-34 and heavier Soviet tanks by increasing the firepower of their tank armament, self-propelled guns, and towed anti-tank guns. As a result, the M4 never enjoyed a notoriety similar to the T-34 with the Germans or post-war Western writers.

The Patton Myth

While there is some basis in fact for the Christie myth — his ideas *were* associated with the very successful T-34 — the origin of the Patton myth is shrouded in mystery.

In *A War to Be Won*, authors Millet and Murray make the astonishing assertion, without any supporting evidence, that George S. Patton blocked introduction of the M26 with its 90mm gun, which they claim could have been in full production in early 1944.[3] In *Death Traps*, Belton Cooper also accuses Patton of blocking introduction of the M26, illustrating that this notion may be widespread.[4] None of these authors offer their readers a clue as to what Patton actually did or when he did it, probably because they do not have one.

What makes Millet's and Murray's claim even more astounding is the fact that among the supporting volumes for the relevant chapter are two excellent biographies of George Patton: Martin Blumenson's *Patton: The Man Behind the Legend, 1885-1945* and Carlo D'Este's *Patton: A Genius for War*. Neither biography mentions anything whatsoever about Patton being involved in tank development or production during World War II. While researching the development of the M26, this author examined the records of the Ordnance Department, Army Service Forces, Army Ground Forces, War Department G-4, and European Theater of Operations. There is nothing in those records associating George S. Patton with the development, production, or introduction of the M26. Nothing.

Besides ignoring their own sources, Murray and Millett should have been extremely skeptical about the possibility that Patton blocked production of the M26. By their own account, they were very much aware that following the slapping incident during the Sicilian Campaign, Patton was on very thin ice. Arguably, only Eisenhower saved him from George Marshall's wrath and an assignment training troops in the U.S. The idea that Patton had sufficient clout to block a major production program strains credulity.

The timeline on the following page summarizes the Army's decisions about producing the M26 and who made them. All this is in the author's book, *Faint Praise*,[5] but the reader is respectfully asked to suffer through the citations in order to be assured that those decisions can be documented from primary sources.

As the timeline shows, George Patton was not involved in the decision to produce 250 T26s. The possibility that he would have inserted himself into the process in September 1943, when LTG Leslie J. McNair (responsible for ground force doctrine and equipment) was involved, is incredible. After General Jacob Devers weighed in with a production request, the idea that Patton would have interfered in an exchange between George C. Marshall and his theater commander is absolutely fatuous.

Possible production of the T26 in April 1944 is nearly as difficult to sustain. After the war, Ordnance spokesmen argued that McNair's opposition to an additional production order in September 1943 delayed production of the tanks, but he did not explain the cause and effect. No one interfered with the order of May 1943 for 10 T26s, but prototypes were not completed until February 1945. In September 1943, the tank was still in the blueprint stage. Further, to begin production in April, Ordnance would had to have found some way to rush the prototype into production, but the prototype was unsatisfactory to the users. Of course, at the time, not even the Ordnance Department predicted production before the fall of 1944.

As a minimum, if someone can develop a scenario showing how the disputes during the fall of 1943 over producing additional T26s actually delayed final production, they should leave Patton out of it. If someone was to blame for delaying introduction of the T26, it was NOT George S. Patton.

This author hopes that those writing or speaking about tanks during World War II, even if they are constrained from looking at primary source documents, will at least consult references already on library shelves. Particularly, if they are prone to sully reputations, as Murray and Millet are, their conclusions ought to be based on meticulous research rather than sloppy scholarship.

Thank you dear readers, for allowing me to vent.

Notes

[1]See Peter Chamberlin & Chris Ellis, *Pictorial History of Tanks of the World 1915-1945* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 1972) pp. 93-97, 169-172, 206-207, and 220-225 for details on British, U.S., and Russian tanks. John Milsom, *Russian Tanks 1900-1970* (New York, N.Y.: Galahad Books, 1970), pp. 96-111 have further details on Russian tanks.

[2]George F. Hofmann, "A Yankee Inventor and the Military Establishment," *ARMOR,* March-April 1976, pp. 13-17, 50-52.

[3]Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millet, *A War To Be Won: Fighting the Second World War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2000), pp. 463.

[4]Belton Cooper, *Death Traps: The Survival of an American Armored Division in World War II,* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1998), p. 139.

[5]All details and their supporting footnotes are from Charles M. Baily, *Faint Praise: American Tanks and Tank Destroyers during World War II,* (Hamden, Conn.: Shoestring Press, 1984), Chapters 4 and 5.

[6]Memorandum from Assistant Chief of Staff, G-4 to CG, Army Service Forces (ASF), 24 May 1943, Records of Army Ground Forces (AGF), file no. 470.8, Record Group 337, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

[7]Letter from MG T.J. Hayes, Acting Chief of Ordnance, to HQ, ASF, 13 September 1943, Document collection entitled T20 History, Research and Development, Records of the Ordnance Department, Record Group 156, NARA.

[8]Cable from Devers to the War Department, 13 November 1943, Records of the Army Staff, G-4 Decimal File, file no. 470.8, Record Group 165, NARA.

[9]Cable from McNarney to Devers, 7 December 1943, Records of the Army Staff, G-4 Decimal file, NARA.

[10]Cable from Devers to McNarney, 10 December 1943, Records of the Army Staff, G-4 Decimal file, NARA.

[11]Memo from Maxwell to CG, ASF, 16 December 1943, Records of the Army Staff, G-4 Decimal file, NARA.

[12]Cable from Marshall to Devers, 21 December 1943, Records of the Army Staff, G-4 Decimal file, NARA.

[13]Cable from Marshall to Eisenhower, 15 January 1943, Records of the Army Staff, G-4 Decimal file, NARA.

[14]Memo from HQ, ASF to Assistant Chief of Staff, G-4, Records of ASF, file no. 470.8, Record Group 407, NARA.

[15]Letter from the President, Armored Board, to CG, ASF, 20 May 1944, Records of ASF, NARA. See Baily, *Faint Praise,* page 122 for details on the serious problems with the T26 prototypes.

This Signal Corps photo from the latter days of WWII shows the then-new M26 tank of the 9th AD in action near Vettweiss, Germany in March 1945.

Oddly enough, the official photo caption notes that the new tank had a "Christie suspension," which it did not. Of U.S. WWII armor, the M26, along with the M24 light tank and the M18 Hellcat tank destroyer, used the more modern torsion bar suspension.

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24 May 1943	The War Department approved production of 10 T26 tanks as part of a larger production order on T20-series tanks.[6]
13 September 1943	In an indorsement to an earlier Armored Command letter requesting adjustment to the production numbers of M4, the Ordnance Department requested production of an additional 500 T26s.[7] General Lesley J. McNair, CG of AGF, successfully opposed this request.
13 November 1943	General Jacob Devers, CG of the European Theater of Operations, requests production of 250 T26s.[8]
7 December 1943	Because of McNair's continued opposition to production of the T26 and other objections, MG Joseph McNarney queried Devers whether his request was based on operational requirements.[9]
10 December 1943	Devers confirmed his request for production of 250 T26s.[10]
16 December 1943	General Russell Maxwell, Army G-4, directed the CG, ASF to produce 250 T26s to meet Devers' requirements.[11]
21 December 1943	General Marshall demonstrated his personal involvement in the T26 by cabling Devers about the decision to produce them, advising a nine-month delay before production.[12]
15 January 1944	General Marshall asked the new CG, ETO, General Eisenhower, if the requirements for the T26 still stood.[13] Eisenhower confirmed it.
21 February 1944	The Ordnance Department estimates first production of the 250 T26s in October 1944.[14] Production actually began in November. Prototypes from the batch of 10 ordered in May 1943 started arriving during February 1944.
20 May 1944	The Armored Board at Fort Knox emphasizes that the T26 was not ready for production in its present state.[15]